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Senate

SUPPLEMENTAL APPROPRIATIONS ACT TO SUPPORT DEPARTMENT OF DEFENSE OPERATIONS IN IRAQ FOR FISCAL YEAR 2003

Mr. DASCHLE. Mr. President, the full attention of the Senate is focused today on legislation to fund our ongoing military campaign in Iraq. The newspapers this morning were focused on our latest military feats, including the apparent destruction of two important Republican Guard divisions and advances that leave us very near the outskirts of Baghdad.

Senator Bob Graham, the ranking member of our Veterans' Affairs Committee, has asked us to look ahead and begin planning for the future to ensure that our veterans receive the counseling, health care, and other services we know they will need after the last battles are fought.

The Graham amendment, of which I am a proud cosponsor, would provide \$375 million to the Department of Veterans Affairs so the VA can provide adequate care for returning troops.

I cannot stress enough how vital this amendment is.

During my career, I have been involved in dealing with the aftermath of two major wars, Vietnam and Operation Desert Storm. In both cases, there was enormous confusion, frustration, and pain--much of it unnecessary, in my view--because our government assumed that veterans would come back and pick up their lives where they left off before the war.

It didn't work that way, and it probably never will. I learned this the hard way, from talking to hundreds of veterans about post-traumatic stress disorder, Agent Orange, readjustment counseling, and Gulf War illnesses. A fascinating literature review, published in 1996, found that war syndromes, many of them poorly understood, have been associated with armed conflicts at least since the Civil War.

Today's amendment would prepare us to assist veterans from day 1, hopefully allowing us to avoid repeating the mistakes of the past. It is not the complete answer, but it begins to move us in the right direction, by adjusting VA funding levels to reflect the number of veterans who will be returning from Iraq.

The funding level in this amendment has a very logical basis. We know that about one-third of veterans from the 1991 Gulf War have been granted service-connected disability claims, which makes

them eligible for VA health care. We can expect, at a minimum, a similar number of veterans to turn to the VA after the conflict. The number may well be even higher than in 1991, since our troops so far are experiencing more ground combat and higher casualties than in Operation Desert Storm. So if one-third of our returning troops seek VA compensation or health care, we can multiply that figure by the VA's average per-patient cost and arrive at an approximate dollar figure: \$375 million, the amount requested in this amendment.

Remarkably, the Administration claims the VA already has sufficient resources to accommodate returning veterans. To that surprising claim, I would respond that the VA's wait list in the upper Midwest now forces 23,000 veterans to wait at least 6 months for health treatment. For next year, the Administration has told us that it needs to charge veterans \$250 million in new fees and higher copayments, not to raise money, but to drive away 1.2 million veterans from VA hospitals and clinics. Everyone except the White House is using the word "crisis" to describe the current state of affairs at the VA.

Senator Graham has a recent newspaper article from Florida, in which VA Secretary Anthony Principi reportedly claims that the VA can take care of returning troops because it blocked access to VA health care for thousands of middle-income veterans. But in January, when the regrettable eligibility decision was announced, the Secretary said this move was necessary just to begin working down the atrocious backlogs at VA hospitals and clinics.

Sadly, this is all just another chapter of an old story with this administration. When it comes to the VA, their budget claims long ago ceased to be credible. The ranking member of the Veterans' Affairs Committee, Senator Graham, deserves our thanks for stepping into the leadership void and proposing a constructive solution.

We are all proud of the spirit, valor, and selflessness exhibited by our troops. Now is the time to show our understanding, our recognition, of the personal cost associated with wartime service. I urge all senators to join this effort to prepare the VA to meet the needs of these men and women after they return home.